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RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHYN #0215/01 0380751
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 070751Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY SANAA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1119
INFO RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 1587
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH 0419

UNCLAS SANAA 000215

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND DRL JBARGHOUT
JEDDAH FOR JLVINGSTON

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [YM](#)

SUBJECT: LIFE ON THE BORDER: CHILD MIGRATION IN YEMEN'S
NORTHERN GOVERNORATES

¶1. SUMMARY. Thousands of children in Yemen's northern governorates travel illegally to Saudi Arabia in search of work, despite the dangers inherent in this path. Children face physical and sexual abuse, as well as grinding poverty across the border. Increasing ROYG awareness and efforts by the international donor community to reduce the migration of underage laborers into Saudi Arabia are the beginnings of a solution to this detrimental social phenomenon. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Poverty, political instability and a lack of opportunities in Yemen's northern governorates create a ripe atmosphere for child trafficking, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor's (MSAL) Child Labor Unit Manager Muna Salim said in a February 2 meeting with PolOff. A 2006 International Organization for Migration (IOM) study showed that border communities lack basic health services, government facilities and adequate schools. According to an October 2008 UNICEF report, soaring food prices and local effects of the global economic crisis put more children at risk of being trafficked across the border to work in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), perceived by impoverished Yemenis as the land of opportunity.

HEAVY TRAFFIC

¶3. UNICEF's Chief of Child Protection Judith Leveillee told PolOff on February 2 that traveling to work in KSA is considered a "rite of passage" for children living on the border. Despite the dangers, most children choose to migrate in search of work) as street beggars, vendors or domestic help) and a better life. On February 1, Ahmed Al-Quraishi of SEYAJ, an organization that promotes children's rights, said that children are also used to traffic drugs, including qat and prescription painkillers, into KSA because they are less likely to be punished by border guards. Children caught by Saudi authorities are usually deported to Yemen) sometimes after time in a Saudi jail) only to try again a few months later. The Children's Parliament, a body of child representatives created in 2004 to address children's issues in Yemen, identified trafficking as a top issue in its 2008 shadow report on the state of Yemen's children. Although no reliable statistics exist, Leveillee said Saudi officials deport hundreds of illegal Yemeni migrants, including minors, every day. In 2008, 500 trafficked children were rehabilitated in the center for trafficked children in Harath (Hajja governorate) and 83 in a similar center in Sana'a. Lamia al-Iryani, head of the Shawthab Foundation for children's advocacy, told PolOff on January 31 that children themselves sometimes work as traffickers because they are less likely to be stopped and searched.

SOCIAL EFFECTS

¶4. Migrant children face significant dangers across the border. In April 2008, villagers in Hajja told UNICEF staff that a high percentage of boys who traveled to KSA looking for work were sexually abused. An unpublished UNICEF study reported that a quarter of children deported to Yemen from KSA suffered from hunger and physical violence while abroad, and 65% reported sleeping on the streets or in mosques. Leveillee said that because of the culture of child labor so prevalent in border areas and the fact that many underage migrants are fleeing abuse, many returned children can not be reintegrated into their families, and slip through the social cracks again.

STEMMING THE FLOW

¶5. As a result of increased recognition of the problem of child trafficking, the ROYG and major donors have begun to direct more funding and attention to the border governorates of Hajja and Saada. To address the problem, the ROYG has a National Action Plan, which includes engaging imams and other community leaders and conducting public awareness campaigns. In 2009, the EU will fund a program in Saada to rehabilitate children affected by the 2008 war between the al-Houthi rebels and government forces. CARE International is beginning a program to build 100 schools in Hajja.

COMMENT

¶6. After years of ignoring the twin problems of child labor and child trafficking, serious recognition and subsequent action plans by the ROYG are a welcome step in the right

direction. More ROYG resources, however, are needed to address the problem adequately. For the time being, the donor community will have to continue to work with partners limited by a chronic lack of funding. END COMMENT.
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